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ABSTRACT

Mediation training should produce highly successful mediators who are capable of carrying out smooth and effective mediation. This study assessed subjects' perceptions of the effectiveness of mediation by comparing trained team mediators to untrained team mediators. Subjects (N=30) evaluated videotaped mediation vignettes showing both the trained and untrained team confronted with the same conflict by the same disputants. It was hypothesized that mediation effectiveness would be higher for trained mediators than for untrained third party participants. Results showed that trained mediators were rated as significantly more effective in establishing trust with the disputants, in directing neutral questions at disputants, and in establishing and enforcing rules during the mediation session. Counter to the hypothesis, untrained mediators were rated significantly higher on items assessing mediators' sensitivity to diversity, on mediators' helpfulness towards disputants, and on positive emotional change in disputants. These perceptions of the untrained mediators may have been due to the fact that trained mediators are taught to act as neutral third parties and are thus discouraged in helping directly. Untrained mediators may be more inclined to provide advice, direction, and answers for the disputants, thus creating the appearance of being more helpful. (RJM)

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The Effects of Peer Mediation Training
on Third Party Facilitated
Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

Mediation training should produce highly successful mediators who are capable of carrying out smooth and effective mediations. This study assessed subjects' perceptions of the effectiveness of mediation involving trained team mediators versus that involving untrained team mediators. Subjects evaluated videotaped mediation vignettes illustrating both formats. It was hypothesized that mediation effectiveness would be higher for trained mediators than for untrained third party participants.

Results from between groups t-tests showed that trained mediators were rated as significantly more effective in establishing trust with the disputants, directing neutral questions at disputants, and establishing and enforcing rules during the mediation session ($p < 0.05$). Counter to the hypothesis, untrained mediators were rated significantly higher on items assessing mediators' sensitivity to diversity, mediators' helpfulness towards disputants, and positive emotional change in disputants ($p < 0.05$).

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable. In the community, in institutions, and in the home, conflict is present and in need of resolution. For school age students, conflict is a constant problem. In particular, high school conflicts typically focus around peer issues, where peers are frequently the source and the target of disagreement. Unsettling matters, such as boyfriend/girlfriend arguments, "X-friends," back-stabbing, and rumors often render students unable to focus on scholastic areas. Many school administrators and counselors are rejecting the old disciplinary style of dealing with students disputes, and are in turn adopting a new model, peer mediation.

In a mediation session, there are typically two trained peer mediators functioning as neutral third party facilitators of communication and understanding between disputants. This is done in a structured setting where a calm, problem-solving conflict resolution style is used. This type of setting allows for modulated emotional expression, while at the same time it avoids disruptive and destructive outbursts. After both parties have expressed their side of the dispute and suggested options for their own solution, a mutually beneficial agreement is written and signed by all present.

Peer Mediation involves theoretical and practical training of the selected peer mediators and a few select staff and/or faculty members. During the mediation training process, the students first focus on understanding themselves in relation to their conflict resolution style (confrontation, problem-solving, or avoidance).

This initial step is followed by discussion and practice of exercises designed to foster confidentiality, neutrality, overall communication, active listening, diplomatic communication skills, and the mediation process.

Neutrality and Confidentiality are two of the most important concepts underlying peer mediation. Neutrality forms the basis of a mediator's actions during a mediation, therefore, neutrality is emphasized in every aspect of a mediator's training. In the section on overall communication (verbal and body language), the students are sensitized to the need to present congruent verbal and nonverbal messages. Active listening skills are developed to enhance communication of concern and enhance accurate understanding. It is also necessary for the mediator to use diplomatic communication skills, such as paraphrasing and "lead-ins," which facilitate mutual understanding.

Lastly, a mediator should possess a strong comprehension of diversity in order to eliminate biases which could lead to favoritism. A focus on diversity and the acceptance of others is a recent addition to this specific mediation program. In the past, the need to eliminate biases was discussed only informally. However, new mediation trainees now encounter a formal and thoroughly structured introduction to the topic of individual differences. This change in format allows for more reflection about harmful biases that students may be harboring.

Training is brought to a close with a strong emphasis on role-play. Mediators practice their new skills in mock mediations to enhance the natural flow of these skills. Finally, students come

together in front of a judge to receive an Oath of Confidentiality. The importance of keeping what one hears during a mediation in confidence is discussed and the new mediators are sworn in.

While much has been written about mediation, little empirical data has been collected. While anecdotal data assessing the program abounds (Burrell & Vogl, 1990, p. 245), there is a need for objective validation of the methods being utilized.

Previous research concerning peer mediation has been on a mixture of items concerning various conflict resolution styles (Putnam & Charmaine, 1982; McFarland & Culp, 1992), the benefits of mediation programs and learned mediation skills (Benson & Benson, 1993; Coffman, 1988; Burrell & Vogl, 1990), the characteristics of mediators and disputants (Araki, 1990), and mediation's effectiveness in solving disputants conflicts (Araki, 1990).

Benson and Benson (1993) provided a scholarly review of their middle school and high school appropriate mediation program in comparison to nationally known programs. These authors used feedback from the mediators, as well as, the authors in program assessment. The program was seen as highly effective and was suggested for adoption. Similarly, research done by Araki (1990) resulted in a positive evaluation of a school district's peer mediation program through a case study approach.

Burrell and Vogl (1990) did a comparable review of another peer mediation program and assessed mediation training through interviews with program directors, school counselors, and administrators. Results of their inquiry showed that the program was positively received by the school. Burrell and Vogl (1990)

refer to the fact that there has been little empirical research done in the area of mediation assessment.

Researchers McFarland and Culp (1992) wished to look at the effectiveness of an interpersonal skills training program on the self-reported conflict resolution styles of high school aged vocational school students. Data gathered through the Putnam-Wilson Organizational Conflict Communication Instrument (form Bx) provided for most needed empirical data within the area of school age conflict resolution assessment. However, McFarland and Culp's research is not directly relevant to this present study because it is assessing students' conflict resolution styles used in handling their own personal conflicts. Therefore, third party mediation is not an issue here.

This study is an attempt to empirically test the value of mediation training on third party facilitated conflict resolution. It is expected that the ratings of mediation effectiveness will be significantly higher for a mediation session conducted by trained mediators than for that conducted by untrained mediators.

Methods

Subjects:

The sample for this study (N=30) consisted of undergraduate students at a small private college located in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Measure:

Subjects completed the Mediation Vignettes Questionnaire (O'Connor, Helverson, & Chambliss). This is a 21-item scale measuring the effectiveness of peer mediators in dealing with disputants and conflict. Aspects of mediation are rated on a Likert format scale ranging from extremely false (1) to extremely true (6). Higher scores indicate greater perceived effectiveness of peer mediators in handling disputants and conflict.

Procedure:

Participants viewed one of two 30-minute videotaped mediation vignettes showing two distinct mediator styles (trained team and untrained team) confronted with the same conflict by the same disputants (trained confederates served as disputants). Subjects were randomly assigned to the two vignette groups and remained blind to the group they were assigned. Prior to the viewing of the vignettes, subjects were given the Mediation Vignettes Questionnaire to review, which also contained a brief, objective description of peer mediation. After subjects viewed the vignette, they rated the mediation segment by completing the questionnaire.

Results

Between groups t-tests revealed significant differences in ratings of the trained and untrained mediators on several items. On three of the items, differences were in the expected direction, indicating better performance among the trained mediators. Trained mediators were perceived to establish trust with the disputants more effectively than untrained mediators ($x=4.27$, $s.d.=0.70$, $n=15$ versus $x=3.67$, $s.d.=0.72$, $n=15$; $t=2.30$, $p<0.03$). Trained facilitators were also perceived to direct questions towards disputants in a more neutral fashion ($x=5.07$, $s.d.=0.88$, $n=15$ versus $x=4.33$, $s.d.=0.82$, $n=15$; $t=-2.36$, $p<0.03$). Lastly, trained mediators were seen as more effective in establishing and enforcing rules during the session ($x=5.33$, $s.d.=0.82$, $n=15$ versus $x=3.33$, $s.d.=1.05$, $n=15$; $t=-5.84$, $p<0.00$).

Group differences on three other items ran counter to the hypothesis. The disputants mediated by untrained facilitators showed more positive emotional change during the session ($x=4.80$, $s.d.=0.68$, $n=15$ versus $x=3.73$, $s.d.=1.16$, $n=15$; $t=3.07$, $p<0.01$). Untrained mediators were perceived to be more sensitive to the different appearances, backgrounds, and communication styles of the disputants ($x=4.67$, $s.d.=0.82$, $n=15$ versus $x=3.47$, $s.d.=1.19$, $n=15$; $t=3.23$, $p<0.00$). Mediation performed by untrained mediators was also perceived to be more helpful for the disputants ($x=4.60$, $s.d.=1.06$, $n=15$ versus $x=3.73$, $s.d.=1.03$, $n=15$; $t=2.27$, $p<0.03$).

Discussion

As hypothesized, trained mediators were perceived to be better at structuring an effective mediation session. Results showed that the trained mediation team was superior to that of the untrained team with respect to the communication of rules, presentation of neutral questions, and conveyance of a sense of trust.

Unlike those untrained in the mediation process, trained mediators appeared skilled in communicating and enforcing rules to facilitate a more productive, continuous mediation. Training seemed to enhance the mediators' ability to create a setting that is conducive to the expression of feelings, yet controls inappropriate behavior.

Mediation training specifically focuses on neutrality as a prerequisite to effective problem resolution, and therefore appearing neutral is a key issue in mediators' communication. Trained mediators are given practice in posing neutral questions that convey a consistent verbal and non-verbal message. They are taught to be sensitive to cues disputants attend to in assessing possible bias in the mediation, and to avoid giving verbal or nonverbal evidence of taking sides. This may account for why, compared to the untrained pair, the trained mediators were seen as better at asking neutral questions not favoring either disputant.

Confidentiality, clearly defined rules, and neutrality are inherent in the explicit structure of peer mediation. Together, these concepts form a basis for the establishment of trust between the mediators and the disputants. Without training, it is possible that the mediators do not sense a need for the establishment of

trust. Even if they detect a need, they may not possess the skills necessary to achieve this type of atmosphere. However, trust is necessary for the disputants to feel free to convey their true feelings, which in turn aids the facilitation of a workable resolution. The results of this study suggest that training is associated with perceptibly more effective establishment of trust during the session.

Contrary to the hypothesis, mediation conducted by untrained mediators evoked a more positive emotional change for the disputants and was seen as more helpful to them. Untrained mediators were also perceived as being more sensitive to the diversity of the disputants than those trained in peer mediation.

The untrained mediators had not yet received the training techniques of peer mediation which require the implementation of rules during the mediation process. With trained mediators, disputants agree to adhere to a set of rules in order to assure the mediation will be beneficial for both parties. Although the untrained team was seen as creating a positive emotional change for disputants, these mediators may have allowed for greater open expression of verbal conflict early on in the session. Thus, they may have permitted a more negative initial baseline for the disputants. This allowed for greater opportunity of a positive emotional change due to the increased early expression of unbridled aggression. However, those trained in peer mediation require disputants to follow rules, not permitting overt conflict initially. Therefore, there would not be much observable positive change in the emotions of the disputants.

Untrained mediators were perceived as being more sensitive to the appearances, backgrounds, and communication styles of the disputants. It is possible that training may have inadvertently led trainees to overlook and minimize the disputants' differences. Due to the structure of mediation and the concept of neutrality, trained mediators treat individuals simply as disputants. Thus, training may, in essence, lower the sensitivity of the trainees towards the individuality of the disputants. The challenge in this type of mediation training is to foster neutrality while avoiding programmatic application of techniques, which can appear to stereotype disputants and convey insensitivity to individual differences.

Lastly, the mediation performed by the untrained mediators was seen as more helpful for the disputants. It may be that training may cause peer mediators to appear "unhelpful" to the disputants because direct advice giving is discouraged. Training in essence demands that trainees act as neutral third parties and do not act as "peer helpers" or counselors. The peer mediator role reduces direct helping. Rather, they are intended to help disputants explore and reach their own solutions. Possibly, untrained mediators take on the role of a more active helper, providing more advice, direction, and answers for the disputants. A mediation conducted in this manner may create the appearance of being more helpful for the disputants. Furthermore, mediation conducted by untrained mediators may have been perceived as more helpful due to the observed positive emotional change in disputants.

Future research might include the use of a larger sample size and a different subject population. Since peer mediation is thus far targeted at high school students, it may be beneficial to use this population for future subjects. Results of this study may help to delineate the effects of peer mediation training and help improve these types of programs.

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